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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 003894

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [ETTC](#) [EPET](#) [IZ](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: JORDAN'S IRAQ JITTERS

REF: (A) AMMAN JO 3705 (B) AMMAN 1782

Classified By: Ambassador Edward Gnehm. Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

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Summary  
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11. (S) Repeated public statements by Jordanian FM Muasher and PM Abul Ragheb since July 10 denying that Jordan will be used as a "launching pad" for U.S. military operations against Iraq shed light on GOJ sensitivity to its vulnerabilities vis-a-vis Baghdad. Similarly, on July 13, the GOJ issued a clear statement distancing itself from former Crown Prince Hassan's participation at a gathering of Iraqi Oppositionists in London this past weekend. There may also have been a political angle to the Jordanians' reluctance to put a stop to oil smuggling through the Port of Aqaba, at least to the extent that it was politically easier to begin than to end the smuggling. With concern about the stalled MEPP as a backdrop, the GOJ appears to be recalibrating its familiar policy of placating the Iraqis and demonstrating to the Jordanian street a degree of independence from domestically unpopular U.S. policies. To calm the immediate uproar, we recommend that the Department find an appropriate opportunity to say that we have not asked Jordan to take part in any new cooperative military activities beyond our routine military-to-military relationship. End Summary.

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Jordan's Vulnerabilities  
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12. (C) As senior GOJ officials from the King down routinely stress to visitors, the government is extremely nervous about the potential domestic repercussions of any visible U.S. preparations for a military confrontation with Iraq, or of perceived Jordanian participation/collaboration in such preparations. The reasons for this concern are familiar:

Oil: Through its oil/barter arrangements, Jordan obtains all of its oil from Iraq at below world market prices. A cut off of Iraqi oil before, during or after U.S. military action could have potentially devastating consequences for Jordan's economy.

MEPP: Without much difficulty, the Iraqis could step up the drumbeat of radical pronouncements on the MEPP, with disruptive consequences for Jordan. At its most extreme, this could turn into a campaign to destabilize Jordan by labeling the GOJ a lackey of the U.S. in the "suppression" of the Palestinian Intifada -- a hot button issue for most of the Jordanian population. As long as average Jordanians view the GOJ as weak on support for the Palestinians, the government will see itself as vulnerable to pressure from Iraq (and other radical states).

13. (C) Periodically, events (or the Iraqis themselves) remind the Jordanians that Iraq has the power to do a great deal of mischief if it chooses. The vulnerabilities noted above are realities that the GOJ keeps in mind as it seeks to protect its national interests in the region's political rapids. Indirectly, they also help explain the GOJ's recent public statements and other policy stances.

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Leaks Generate Frequent Jordanian Denials  
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14. (U) Over the past week, senior Jordanian officials have gone out of their way to refute the proposition -- sourced by the press to U.S. officials -- that Jordan will be used as a U.S. "launching pad" for future military operations against Iraq. In interviews with local, regional, and international media (including the NYTimes on July 10), and most recently at the conclusion of the Arab League Follow-Up Committee meeting in Cairo on July 12, FM Muasher "categorically denied any plans between Jordan and the United States in this regard." PM Ali Abul Ragheb, in a July 11 Press Conference (given prominent coverage in the local pro-government media), echoed and amplified the message: "Jordan does not allow and will not allow in the future its territory and airspace to be used to interfere in the affairs of any other Arab country, particularly fraternal Iraq."

15. (U) Both the FM and PM in their public statements have

also contended that there are "no U.S. troops on Jordanian soil," and the local press reported that FM Muasher told the Iraqi Ambassador to Jordan that he could "visit any military base at any time to personally verify the veracity of the Jordanian statements." A tour is being arranged for Azraq AFB.

16. (S) The Ambassador, in meetings July 10 and 11, told both Muasher and Abul Ragheb that their statements denying any U.S. troop presence in Jordan were neither factually correct (given our long-standing training and exercise program) nor sustainable. Muasher's response was that this problem began because "someone in the Pentagon had leaked materials on preparations for an assault on Iraq. Look, this puts us in a very difficult position. I'm being called by the New York Times and others on this. We have no choice but to say what we are saying."

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Prince Hassan's London Appearance Adds to the Story  
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17. (U) Taking a similar tack, the GOJ July 13 delivered a clear public message that former Crown Prince Hassan's participation at the London gathering of Iraqi Oppositionists was "a personal act . . . and does not represent official policy." Minister of State for Political Affairs, Mohammed Adwan, in a statement carried by the official Petra News Agency, and given prominent above-the-fold coverage in the July 14 local press, stated "We were surprised at the participation, which neither the leadership nor the government had any prior knowledge of, and which does not conform to the principled Jordanian stand on brotherly Iraq."

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Humanitarian Flights and Oil Smuggling  
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18. (S) The barrage of public statements by senior GOJ officials this past week are not the only evidence of the wary "neighborliness" the GOJ seeks to maintain with Iraq. This policy often has an overtly economic or commercial component. Royal Jordanian Airlines (RJ) has continued its humanitarian flights from Amman to Baghdad at about 4-5 per week. This represents a small downward trend in flight frequency since the Embassy demarched the GOJ in mid-June that RJ's Baghdad flights threatened to become a regular commercial transaction and needed to be scaled back. (The DCM raised this issue again with the FM's office on July 15 and pressed for further and faster reductions.)

19. (C) Similarly, after almost a month's hiatus, there was a renewed attempt to smuggle illegal Iraqi oil from the Jordanian port of Aqaba (ref a) at the beginning of July. While this case appears to have been stopped successfully, it suggests the allurements to fudging policy (and the truth) that Iraq offers Jordanian officials. We can only assume that some Jordanians, whether officials or private citizens, have benefited from the smuggling that has taken place. The scheme inevitably created a political dynamic, however, and it was no doubt easier to start the exercise than to stop it.

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Comment and Recommendation  
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10. (S) The actions and statements outlined above bear careful watching, but we know from contacts with the King and other senior officials that they do not represent any fundamental change in Jordanian policy. They would love to see Saddam go, but in the meantime they must live next to him. They are the latest developments in the long-continued balancing act that Jordan must carry out to protect its interests. The perceived deadlock in the MEPP (current diplomatic activities notwithstanding), the disappointment, frustration and anger many Jordanians feel regarding the plight of the Palestinians in the face of Israeli reoccupation, and the continued economic difficulties Jordan faces as a result of the Intifada and the global economic slowdown heighten the GOJ's perception that on issues relating to Iraq, it has to tread very carefully. We will see a similar pattern whenever U.S.-Iraq confrontation intensifies.

11. (S) Embassy Recommendation: To deal with the immediate irritant on Iraq -- the stories reportedly tying Jordan to U.S. military preparations against Saddam Hussein -- we recommend that the Department find an opportunity to say that we have not approached the Jordanians with requests for military cooperation beyond our routine military-to-military contacts.  
Gnehm